

Snapshot of an Empire: The Manchus (Qing)

Relevant Key Concepts:

New transoceanic maritime reconnaissance: Zheng He (during Ming) (4.1.III.A.)
Land Empires expand with gunpowder: Manchus (4.3.II.B.)
New elites, Manchus in China (4.2.II.A.)
Rulers used religion to justify rule: emperor's performance of Confucian rituals (4.3.I.B.)
Treatment of different ethnic and religious groups, Manchu treatment of non-Chinese (4.3.I.C.)
Bureaucratic elites: civil service bureaucrats (4.3.I.D.)
Silk Production in China (4.2.I.A.)
Buddhism spreads in Asia: (4.1.VI.B.)

China: From Ming to Qing

Near the end of the previous period (600-1450) the Ming overthrew Mongol rule and set up a new Chinese dynasty. They established the previous bureaucratic/Confucian political system and sought commercial and tributary contacts with the states in Asia and the Indian Ocean. The Ming sponsored voyages, such as those led by Admiral Zheng He, to restore former Chinese preeminence in the world. In the 1430s these voyages were stopped. The Chinese government decided to devote their resources to purifying their empire and protecting them from further nomadic invasions.

By the 1600s the Ming dynasty had grown weak and corrupt. As they declined, the Manchu people across the Great Wall were expanding, unifying a strong state and borrowing Chinese bureaucratic institutions. In 1644 the Manchus entered China and easily drove all the way to Beijing where they defeated the weakened Ming and established their own rule over China, the Qing Dynasty.

The Qing Dynasty would be characterized by a problem some other land-based empires had in this time period—a minority ruling a different ethnic or religious majority. To bridge the gap between themselves and the ethnic Han Chinese, the Manchus implemented the civil service Confucian bureaucracy. Chinese were allowed to rise in the political system, and Qing Emperors adopted the Chinese title Son of Heaven. The Manchu emperors began the practice of publically performing Confucian rituals to gain political legitimization from the Chinese. For example, each year the Emperor would plow the first furrow of ground in front of the Temple of Agriculture. This symbolic gesture was to ensure a good harvest. Most everything the emperor did was choreographed with Confucian ritual. The Manchu emperors continued these rituals. They also kept the classical Confucian texts as the basis of the civil service examination system.

The Manchus utilized the nobles of conquered areas to help them administrate and control their growing empire. Buddhists and Muslim leaders, as well as Mongol aristocrats were given positions in the Qing. They respected local traditions by exempting Buddhist monks and monasteries from state labor service and taxes. They respected Mongol traditions by not allowing Chinese to migrate into Mongol territory and dilute Mongol culture. Indeed, the Qing respected Tibetan, Mongol and Buddhist culture, a practice that eased the expansion of the Qing Empire into new areas. The Manchus outlined what is today the general borders of China, and by respecting the cultures of minorities they preserved a sense of identity for many of these groups and endowed them with an enduring sense of autonomy (consider Tibet, for example). Despite the fact that ethnic Chinese were allowed to rise in the bureaucracy, the Manchus preserved the highest positions in the government for themselves. They maintained their cultural integrity by banning marriage between Manchus and Chinese. Han Chinese were forbidden to move into the Manchu homeland. They forced the Chinese to forgo the Ming style robes in favor of Manchu garments and ordered the Chinese to adopt the Manchu hair style of shaving the front of the head and braiding the long hair in the back into a queue.

Much of what the Manchu accomplished resembled previous Chinese dynasties. They centralized rule through a bureaucracy. They expanded militarily far into central Asia and established tributary relations with Vietnam, Burma, Korea and Nepal. They focused China's economic strength more on the practice of agriculture than they did commerce; the city of Canton in the south of China was the only location where trade with Europe was allowed. As new crops were transplanted from the New World, the Qing experienced a large population growth commensurate with their territorial growth. In some areas, silk production exceeded rice production and consumed all surplus labor of peasant families.

